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METER AND RHYTHM AND THEIR RELATION TO POETRY

In Four Parts—Part I

By H W MAGOUN

No one pretends to read an English poem as it is scanned. A true reading, in fact, has little in common with the scansion, although scansion is employed to determine the meter. What is the meaning of this? If meter, which is the product of scansion, represents the true poetical form of the verses, what ground can there be for not following that form in reading? Some authorities, indeed, teach that we do follow it, but that different readers arrange the elements of the bars in a somewhat different fashion according to individual taste. If, however, this is all that there is in the problem, why does the effect produced upon the ear by the scansion differ so plainly from that produced by the reading?

That it does differ even the dullest hearer must recognize, although the old mechanical scansion is no longer tolerated, even in the Classics. Nay, more than this, the very word scansion is coming into disrepute, and in its place the words "metrical reading" are often used. Occasionally this expression is exchanged for another; namely, "rhythmical reading", which is, however, a different thing, as a little thought will show.

"Meter" and "rhythm" are words in common use; but their meaning is often confused. The same is true, though to a less degree, of the words, "rhythmical" and "metrical". By a metrical composition is usually meant one that may be divided into small sections, which are more or less regular and occupy approximately the same length of time. The word rhythmical is frequently used in a similar sense; but it occupies a larger sphere, since there is such a thing as "rhythmical prose". By this is meant prose that approaches a metrical composition, but does not become one.

Rhythm deals primarily with time. It refers properly to bars of approximately equal length, but to bars of a somewhat diverse character. Meter, on the other hand, refers primarily to feet and to feet of a single type, although they may admit of one or two occasional variations usually at the end of a line. Those who read poetry as professionals deal exclusively with rhythm. They pay little or no attention to meter, as will appear if an attempt is made to obtain the conventional feet from their reading. Those who never really pass beyond the scansion stage—there are such—never escape from those feet, but are constantly enslaved by them. Such persons can hardly be called readers. They know little of the true artistic beauty of poetical compositions, and they may be said to be rhythmically paralyzed by meter.

There are, then, two distinct things connected with metrical compositions, one of which has to do with feet and the other with bars, although these in turn are often confused. They are not necessarily the same. In some cases, they may, in fact, differ de-

cidedly from each other in the same poem; for the accepted meter may be in $3/8$ time, while the rhythm is clearly in $2/4$, or even in $4/4$ time. The best way to test the matter is by means of a few examples.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade" is almost universally scanned with tribrachs, or "accented dactyls", in $3/8$ time ($\text{—} \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$), although Cicero and Quintilian unite with Aristotle in condemning such an 'undignified' movement. Well they may; for it is in lively waltz time and is entirely unsuited for the expression of dignified thoughts. Poe would have put this poem into true or Classical dactyls in $2/4$ time ($\text{—} \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$). Either is bad enough, if taken seriously, a thing which no one now does, although a curious dilemma results. As the proverb has it, one cannot eat his cake and keep it, too; and yet that must be attempted, in effect, on such a basis. The theoretical meter of scansion is the cake supposedly eaten in reading; but in reality it is never touched.

Let any one try the experiment of following either scheme accurately with the help of the time beats, and he will soon be convinced that such schemes cannot be followed in reading. Care must be taken, however, with the $3/8$ time lest a pause be admitted at the top of the triangle in beating. If there is no pause, the movement will be distinctly a dancing one. If the dancing element does not appear, the fact is significant and the time is not triple. If even so brief a pause as approximately a third of a second (for an ordinary speaker) is admitted at this point, the time is changed from $3/8$ to $2/4$. Such a change is exceedingly common, and it is at this point that the error usually creeps in. Many honestly believe that they are using $3/8$ time, when they are using $2/4$ in fact, because they have admitted such a pause. There is much to be said on this subject; but it cannot be said here.

The conventional signs that are in ordinary use for indicating scansion are perhaps a necessary evil, since many do not understand musical notation; but they are none the less unsatisfactory. The two schemes thus become (the symbol $\text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$ indicates that three shorts occupy the time of two):—

Half a league, | half a league, | half a league | onward,
 $\text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{—} \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$

All in the | valley of death | rode the six | hundred.
 $\text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{—} \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$

"Forward, the | light brigade! | Charge, for the
 $\text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{—} \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$
guns!" he said.
 $\text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—} \quad \text{ } \text{ } \text{ } \text{—}$

In either case, if these feet are taken seriously and accurately, a meter results; but what becomes of the

meaning of the lines? What is the cause of the inevitable smile which greets such a rendering? Why do people deny that they scan that way? What do they do? Do they follow the scheme? Can they follow it and not scan that way? But if the scheme is followed, is meter, in any such sense as this, a thing that appeals to the poetic fancy? Is the word meter, however, commonly used in any other sense? Does it mean, as a rule, anything else than a conventional measure or foot by which language is made to conform, with a few apparent exceptions, throughout the poem to one or two fixed and more or less artificial types determined by scansion?

When a person speaks of a trochaic meter, for example, does he not mean that the language of the entire poem, with the exceptions noted, is supposed to conform to a standard foot containing one long and one short syllable? Can scansion be anything but mechanical, if such types are closely followed? But if they are not closely followed, of what use is the scheme, except as a convenient artificial means of measuring verse material? Is it of any use whatever, except in the most general way, in helping any one to read a poem correctly or to appreciate its beauty?

Does either of the renderings just given, if actually followed, allow of a natural intonation in the pronunciation of the words as they stand? Does either take into consideration the meaning which they are meant to convey? Is poetry, then—using the word in its ordinary sense—devoid of meaning so far as its meter is concerned? Is it, to this extent, a mere jingle? But if not, is it a thing divorced from its metrical form? Is there any beauty in a scansion which actually follows the scheme? Have we not, in practice, unconsciously drifted away from the scansion schemes, or rather have we not revolted from the mechanical products of a strict interpretation of them, so that we no longer follow them in reality, but tend to read metrically rather than to scan? Can a person scan and not observe the feet? What is scansion? Is it not a marking of the feet with the voice? Can any one scan and ignore the feet? But do we not ignore them in reading?

Critics, so-called, declared that Byron's "Bride of Abydos" was musical, in spite of all law. They found that scansion, applied in the ordinary way, with "accented dactyls" (— — —), produced the following result:

Knów ye the | lánd where the | Cýprus and | Mýrtle
Are emblems | of deeds that | are done in | their
clime—

Whére the rage | óf the vul|túre, the love | óf the
tur|tlé,

Nów melt in|tó softness, | nów madden | tó crime?

Its absurdity is manifest. Poe ridiculed such a treatment in his "Rationale of Verse", and he scores the critics for taking refuge in "catalecticism", "acatalecticism", and "hypermeter". He reads as follows, using true dactyls (— — —) without regard to the lines:

Know ye the | land where the | Cyprus and | Myrtle
Are | emblems of | deeds that are | done in their |
jathe| turtle. Now| melt into| softness, now| madden
to| crime?

Poe doubtless felt that he had solved the riddle; but had he? He goes on (*ibid.*) to analyze a stanza from C. P. Cranch, saying that he has "never yet met the man who had the faintest comprehension of the true scanning of these lines, or of such as these". His analysis amounts to this (here the symbol ~ has to be used to indicate three shorts put into the time of one):

Many are the | thoughts that | come to | me
— ~ ~ | — ~ | — ~ | — ~

In my | lonely | musing;
— ~ | — ~ | — ~

And they | drift so | strange and | swift
— ~ | — ~ | — ~ | — ~

There's no | time for | choosing
— ~ | — ~ | — ~

Which to | follow; | for to | leave
— ~ | — ~ | — ~ | — ~

Any, | seems a | losing.
— ~ | — ~ | — ~

That these lines are metrical no one can dispute. They are read instinctively as poetry. But how much resemblance is there between Poe's scansion and an ordinary reading? While his system of marking differs from the one here used, he makes the movement trochaic and the time 3/8 as given. The simple truth is that the difficulty concerning these lines grows out of the fact that the rhythm of a natural reading is necessarily different from any meter that can be obtained by scanning them. To begin with, scansion allows for no pauses, although these lines, if read naturally, have many pronounced ones. According to my own analysis, the rhythm of such a reading is in 4/4 time with some syncopated accents, such as are common in music. The stanza begins with a half bar in regular 4/4 fashion and runs about as follows, the balancing pauses being indicated by figures:

	Many are the	thoughts that come to	me		
	>> ~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	
	In my	lonely musing;			
	2 ~ ~	~ ~	~ ~		
	And they	drift so strange and	swift,		
	4 2 ~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	
	There's no	time for choosing			
	2 ~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	~ ~	
	Which to follow;	for to leave			
	~ ~	~ ~	2 ~ ~	~ ~	
	Any, seems a	losing.			
	~ ~ 2 2 ~ ~	~ ~			

The divided bars (indicated by the double lines), which are here employed, correspond to ordinary musical usage. They are too abundant in our hymns to call for comment. The balancing pauses are also too common to need explanation. They are inserted instinctively in reading, even by a novice, and they correspond to musical rests, whose forms have been followed in the values assigned to the figures. The lingering pronunciation of certain words is due in part to the use made of the final consonants. It is perhaps the most important feature of this rhythm.

